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ABSTRACT

The border between fact and fiction becomes blurred in legend, stories which themselves have a history, and in their evolving shape they carry the imprint of all the hands that passed them. Through the Internet, students can track the growth of a legend like that of King Arthur, from its emergence in the so-called Dark Ages to its arrival on the silver screen. The learning objectives of this lesson plan are: to examine the historical origins of the Arthurian legend; to investigate how medieval historians and storytellers reflected the concerns of their own times in their treatment of the legend; and to gain insight into the use of literature as historical evidence. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Exploring Arthurian Legend

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Lesson Plans

SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

The border between fact and fiction becomes blurred in legend, stories which themselves have a history and in their evolving shape carry the imprint of all the hands that passed them. Through the Internet, students can track the growth of a legend like that of King Arthur, from its emergence in the so-called Dark Ages to its arrival on the silver screen.

Learning Objectives

To examine the historical origins of the Arthurian legend; to investigate how medieval historians and storytellers reflected the concerns of their own times in their treatment of the legend; to gain insight into the use of literature as historical evidence.

Lesson Plan

1 Begin by asking students to tell the story of King Arthur. Use the chalkboard to take notes on the characters they mention, the places, and motifs (e.g., Camelot, Excalibur, the Round Table, the Holy Grail). Discuss where they have acquired their probably-extensive knowledge about this legendary figure and why his story should persist into our times. Explain that the story of King Arthur has been told and re-told for nearly a thousand years, and that through this story we can find a connection to the world of the Middle Ages and trace its legacy today.

2 Use the resources of the **Labyrinth** website to introduce students to the vast historical period embraced by the King Arthur legend, stretching from the 5th century, when he may have lived, to the 15th century when Sir Thomas Mallory gave the story its most influential form in **Le Morte D'Arthur**. Click "Arthurian Studies" at the **Labyrinth** homepage, then on "King Arthur Site" for access to a "**Timeline of Arthurian Britain**." Have students annotate this timeline by adding non-Arthurian events with which they may be already familiar (e.g., the reign of

Literature: British

Literature: Fiction

History: World: Europe

9-12

chronological thinking

historical comprehension

historical analysis and interpretation

historical research

Internet research skills

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual

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Charlemagne, the Norman Conquest, the signing of the Magna Carta, the Crusades) to place the evolving story in its historical context.

3 Have students read some of the key historical records of Arthur available at the "**King Arthur Site**" and the "**Camelot Project**," both accessible through the "Arthurian Studies" link at the **Labyrinth**. In a short extract from **De Excidio Britanniae**, by the 6th-century British monk Gildas, they will find a picture of the world Arthur is supposed to have inhabited. In a brief extract from Historia Brittonum, by the 9th-century British historian Nennius, they will meet an Arthur already passing into legend. Discuss the character and significance of Arthur as represented in these early accounts. What does he seem to stand for in these narratives? What can we infer about the societies in which these historians lived from the ways they present Arthur and his actions?

4 Next, turn to the medieval romance tradition that gave enduring life to Arthur's legend. Ambitious students may be eager to read some of these works, many of which are available online in Middle English; click "Arthurian Studies" on the **Labyrinth** homepage, then click "**Camelot Project**" for a selection.

- Students can prepare individual reports on the principal figures of Arthurian romance: Lancelot, Guinevere, Gawain, Galahad, Perceval, Merlin, Morgan le Fay, and Mordred. For Internet research, they can follow the **Labyrinth** "Arthurian Studies" link to the "**King Arthur Site**," and to the "**Camelot Project**" where they will find profiles of these and many other characters. Have students suggest in their reports how these characters might reflect on the ideals and anxieties of medieval society.
- Students can also report on important themes of Arthurian romance: feudal loyalty, courtly love, chivalry, the Holy Grail. For information on these topics they can follow the **Labyrinth** homepage link to "Medieval Studies Text, Image, and Archival Databases" for access to "**ORB, Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies**," which features a specialized online encyclopedia, or to the "**Internet Medieval Sourcebook**," an indexed collection of medieval texts, including many in translation. Direct students to search these sites using their topic as a keyword and have them suggest in their reports how these literary themes might reflect on the real-life values and beliefs of medieval nobility.
- Encourage students to be creative in presenting their reports. Some may have the computer skills to produce multimedia presentations. Others may wish to present their findings in a dramatic form, staging a talk show interview with Guinevere, for example, or performing as medieval minstrels schooled in the arts of courtly love. Whatever the

language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

National Geography Standards

10. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of earth's cultural mosaics (more)
17. How to apply geography to interpret the past (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
3. People, Places, and Environments (more)
6. Power, Authority, and Governance (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Theatre

1. Script writing through

format, all students should have at least a written outline of their findings with citations for their sources of information. (See "Note on Citations" of the Fall 1997 edition of Crossing Borders for a guide to Internet citation standards.)

5 Conclude this lesson by inviting students to investigate how the Arthurian legend has been adapted in our own times, particularly by filmmakers. The "Camelot Project" website link at **Labyrinth** has an extensive **bibliography of films** on Arthurian themes, some of which may already be familiar to students: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, A Kid in King Arthur's Court*. Students might form study groups to view a selection of Arthurian films on video and write reviews from an informed medievalist's point of view. Which themes and motifs of Arthurian legend appear in each film? How are the values implicit in the story related to life in our society?

Extending the Lesson

As its name implies, the **Labyrinth** website offers many paths into the Middle Ages. Students interested in this period might follow the "**England**" link to explore the castles of Great Britain and a variety of living history projects that bring medieval times to life. Or they might click on "**France**" to take a virtual tour of that country's Gothic cathedrals and trace the growth of the medieval city.

improvising, writing, and refining scripts based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history (more)

2. Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions (more)
5. Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices (more)
7. Analyzing, critiquing, and constructing meanings from informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions (more)
8. Understanding context by analyzing the role of theatre, film, television, and electronic media in the past and the present (more)

View your state's standards